

U.S. District Court for the Northern Mariana Islands

Additional Information for Position Applicants

Some applicants for position openings, who are from outside the Northern Mariana Islands, have asked for more information about the Northern Mariana Islands, and about the position opening at the U.S. District Court. Here are some typical questions and answers:

Where is Saipan? Where are the Northern Mariana Islands?

The "Mariana Islands" are a chain of islands in the western Pacific Ocean, about 3,700 miles west of Hawaii, located about 145 degrees East Longitude, and beginning from 12 degrees North Latitude. Guam is the southernmost and largest island in the Mariana Islands. Guam has been a U.S. Territory for over 100 years. Northward from Guam are the "Northern Mariana Islands", which through history have been a separate political entity, and are now the U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. The capitol is the island of Saipan (about 150 miles north of Guam), with an approximate population of 60,000. There are two other populated islands in the Northern Mariana Islands: Rota (approximately 4,000 population) and Tinian (approximately 4,000 population). There are a few other islands in the northern part of the Mariana Islands which are either actively volcanic or only have a very few inhabitants. Flying time from Saipan to Hawaii is 8 hours; to Tokyo 3-1/2 hours; to Manila 3-1/2 hours; to Hong Kong 5 hours. Other relatively close travel destinations include Palau, Korea, China, Thailand, Bali, and Australia.

What is the size and population of Saipan?

The island of Saipan is approximately 15 miles long, and 3 to 5 miles wide. The highest point on the island is 1,500 feet. There is a ridgeline running along the middle of the island. The western side of the island has more flat land and a lagoon with protective outer reef. More of the population is located on the western and southern parts of the island. The population of Saipan island is approximately 60,000. Of this population, about 20,000 are native "Chamorro" or "Carolinian" people. There are also about 20,000 Filipinos, and the remainder of the population are from Japan, Korea, China, Thailand, Bangladesh, India, Russia, the other islands of Micronesia, and the United States mainland. Those people who were born in the Northern Mariana Islands are U.S. citizens. Most people in Saipan who are from other countries are guest workers who are not citizens of the Northern Mariana Islands.

What is the weather like in Saipan?

Saipan has a tropical climate. Because it is a fairly small island, the air temperature is moderated by the ocean. There are two peak high-temperature periods in late May as the sun passes directly overhead moving north in late spring, and then in late August as the sun returns south in late summer. During the hottest days there is a lot of solar energy. It *really feels hot*, but the air temperature does not exceed 95 degrees because of the moderating effect of the ocean. During the coolest time of year, in late January, the air temperature drops as low as 70 degrees overnight. Temperatures are about 8 degrees cooler at the higher elevations of the island. Humidity ranges from a low of about 60% to a high of 95%. There is a "dry season" from January through May,

when there is reduced rainfall. From June through December there is a "rainy season", when it rains more frequently. During the early raining season it can be hot and humid. Most homes and offices in Saipan are air-conditioned year round to reduce indoor humidity and temperature.

Do you have hurricanes or typhoons in Saipan?

Yes. Saipan has "typhoons". A typhoon is a hurricane, but in this region of the Pacific they are called "typhoons". Saipan usually experiences one or more typhoons each year. Typhoon Season lasts from about August through January. Because typhoons are frequent, most homes and buildings are made of concrete and other sturdy materials to withstand heavy wind force. Residents take many precautions before and during typhoons, so there is rarely any loss-of-life from typhoons. But typhoons equivalent to "Category 1" through "Category 3", and "super-typhoons" equivalent to a "Category 4" or "Category 5" hurricane are very common in this region, and Saipan has experienced all degrees of typhoon strength in the past. Although there is rarely loss-of-life, there is always some amount of wear and tear from each typhoon. Even the mildest typhoons strip all the foliage from the otherwise lush vegetation, leaving a barren landscape until the next rainy season begins. There are usually electrical and cable television service outages after each typhoon, ranging from several days after a Category 1 or 2 storm, to several *weeks* in the event of a super-typhoon. During these outages, some lucky souls have generator power, and the rest of the population exists without air conditioning or other electrical amenities until power can be restored. About once each 20 years Saipan experiences a severe typhoon that does extensive damage to the infrastructure of the island.

What are the best things about Saipan and the worst things about Saipan?

Of course this is a matter of personal taste. Saipan is a tropical island, with beautiful ocean water and lush vegetation. There is a particularly beautiful season in late May, June and July when the flame trees are in full bloom. There are nice beaches, great scuba diving, and several world-class golf courses. There are first-class tourist hotels and good restaurants with many different ethnic foods. There are many interesting travel destinations throughout the Pacific Rim which are fairly close and inexpensive to travel to. But Saipan is small and very remote. Beyond a certain range there is not much entertainment, shopping, or variety of recreational activities. Saipan is a very long distance from the U.S. Mainland, making it arduous and expensive to travel back and forth. Fortunately the cost of telephone and Internet service is more reasonable these days, but communication is still difficult because the local time zone is between 6 and 10 hours different than time zones in the U.S. Mainland. Those who relocate to Saipan must adjust to a different locality, culture, climate, type of housing, cost of living, and availability of goods and services.

What about the legal system, banking, postal service and communications?

Saipan and the Northern Mariana Islands are part of the United States, with "Commonwealth" status, and are subject to U.S. Federal law except in the areas of immigration, minimum wage, and taxation which are locally determined. The local currency is the U.S. dollar, and the major banks are members of the FDIC, and are recognized as U.S. banks. Postal service is provided by the United States Postal Service, however there is not home delivery of mail so everyone has their own post office box number. The USPS "state code" is "MP", and the zip code is "96950". Postage rates to Saipan are set at "U.S. domestic postal rate zone no. 8". Saipan is served by Federal Express, DHL and UPS, however their shipping rates are much higher than within the

U.S. mainland (particularly for UPS). The Northern Mariana Islands have a U.S. domestic telephone area code of "670". Most long distance services from the U.S. mainland provide telephone connection to area code 670 at the same cost as any U.S. mainland area code, or with only a modest long distance charge. But some ultra-low cost long distance services will not provide long distance telephone service to area code 670. There are several Internet service providers in Saipan. Two of the ISP's offer "broadband" service. Basic-speed DSL Internet service from one of the ISP's is \$50 per month. Other prices vary higher and lower.

What about schools in Saipan?

There are public schools in Saipan offering Kindergarten through 12th Grade. The public schools are subject to the U.S. educational standards, including the "No Child Left Behind Act". Generally speaking, the public schools are probably in the lower range of national student achievement. However, individual motivated students do quite well within the public school system. There are also a few different choices of private schools and pre-schools in Saipan. Usually the private schools work toward higher student achievement levels. Most of the private schools are sponsored by religious organizations, such as Catholic and Protestant groups. There is a Community College in Saipan which has expanded into limited undergraduate and graduate programs in targeted majors, in association with other universities.

Are there other jobs available in Saipan for family members?

Yes and No. Some occupations such as certified teachers, certified health care providers, and some professions such as law and certified accountancy have good employment prospects. Other occupations can be difficult to find jobs that pay comparably to the U.S. Mainland. This is because the economy is very small in Saipan, and the local labor laws allow for recruitment of both skilled and unskilled non-citizen workers from other countries at very low minimum wages.

Are there churches available in Saipan?

Just about every christian faith is represented with a church or meeting place in Saipan. Most native Saipanese and most Filipinos are Catholic. There are also many other churches and the culture is accepting of people of all faiths. Non-christian faiths are also prominent among some ethnic groups in Saipan, but meeting-places are usually less formal.

What is the cost of living in Saipan?

Federal employment in Saipan currently provides a 25% "COLA" premium. The cost of living quite likely eats up the entire COLA. Nearly everything bought from stores must be imported by ship or by air-freight. This adds a substantial premium to the cost of most imported products, especially with recent increases in fuel costs which have resulted in increased shipping charges. Additionally, there is an import tax levied by the local government, which further increases the cost of imported goods, including everything from food to vehicles. Saipan is a small market, and businesses are not big enough to offer volume discount pricing to their customers. Housing rents are lower than in some major cities. Some restaurants and service companies which have high labor factors can offer reasonable prices because many employees are paid a low minimum wage. In past years, the local government has had a lower tax rate than in the U.S. Mainland. However, recent adjustments by the local government are likely to reduce the tax savings to be more similar to the tax rates for the U.S. Mainland. There is not currently any sales tax, but there

is not any guarantee against future implementation of a sales tax.

Can I buy a house in Saipan?

Yes, but you can't really buy the land the house is built on. Non-native residents can *lease* property for up to 55 years, and can build on that property. But at the end of 55 years the property and its structures revert to the landowner. During the term of the lease you may be able to renegotiate the lease to re-extend it to a new term of 55 years beginning on the renewal date, but you can't side-step the 55-year limit by such terms as "55 years plus option to renew". 55 years is the hard-and-fast limit on land leases.

For the Court Reporter position, would my current Federal salary be carried over?

In the U.S. Courts payroll system, court reporters have a fixed salary scale depending on work location and qualifications. The salary for the Court Reporter position at the U.S. District Court for the Northern Mariana Islands is set at the "CR-00: Rest of the United States" scale, which does not have any "locality pay" added. There are five "Levels" within this scale, through which a Court Reporter advances based on a combination of qualifications and longevity, as detailed in the vacancy announcement which was published for this position. On top of the pay level specified in the CR-00 salary scale, the Federal government currently pays 25% cost of living allowance (COLA) to Federal employees in this region. The base salary is taxable, but the COLA supplement is not subject to Federal income tax. The 25% COLA is subject to change by the U.S. Congress, and cannot be guaranteed by anyone. Other cities in the United States have special "locality pay" salary scales, but do not have COLA allowances. If someone is currently working in a city that has a special locality pay scale (such as New York City or San Francisco), that locality pay scale would no longer apply if that person became re-employed in the Northern Mariana Islands.

What other certifications would be considered for qualification and pay determination?

The guidelines set by the United States Courts allow for certifications equivalent to NCRA certification to be considered.

According to the U.S. Courts Guide To Judiciary Policies and Procedures (Vol.VI, Chapter 3, Section 4.3): "The test for listing on the registry of professional reporters consists of a written knowledge section plus a skills section which requires the ability to record 180 words per minute for literary matter, 200 words per minute for jury charge, and 225 words per minute for testimony. The National Stenomask Verbatim Reporters Association examinations and the Certified Shorthand Reporters examinations required by some state governments may be acceptably equivalent to the National Court Reporters Association testing."

According to the same source: "The NCRA Certified Realtime Reporter examination consists of five minutes of professionally audio-recorded dictation (straight matter) at variable speeds ranging from 180-200 words per minute. Reporters are required, at a 96% accuracy rate, to produce a simultaneous translation and display of live proceedings utilizing computer-aided translation within five seconds of stenotype input. Without editing, the candidate must produce an ASCII (computer language) text file on diskette. Candidates are required to provide all necessary personal equipment and software (e.g. computer, and display, write, cable, and realtime

software.) Any other qualifying examination must be equivalent to the NCRA CRR examination."

According to the U.S. Courts, Human Resources Manual, Chapter 5.4, the Registered Merit Reporter certification is described as: "Registered Merit Reporter Certificate from the National Court Reporters Association, the National Verbatim Reporters Association or have passed an equivalent examination".

The NCRA Website (www.NCRAonline.org) describes the Registered Merit Reporter exam as follows: "The RMR Exam consists of a 100-question Written Knowledge Test (WKT) that focuses on four areas of knowledge--reporting (47%), transcript production (41%), administration (6%), and professional issues and continuing education (6%). Your scaled score must be a minimum of 70 to pass the WKT. To earn your RMR, you'll also have to pass three sections of a skills test that evaluates you in three areas--Literary at 200 wpm, Jury Charge at 240 wpm, and Testimony/Q&A at 260 wpm. After dictation, you have 75 minutes to transcribe your notes from each leg. You must have 95% accuracy on each leg to pass."

If an applicant requests equivalent recognition of a non-NCRA certification, we will forward details of that certification to the Administrative Office of the United States Courts for evaluation and approval before it is recognized as equivalent certification.

Certifications other than NCRA Registered Reporter, Registered Merit Reporter, Realtime Reporter, or direct equivalents to those certifications are not considered for employment qualification or pay determination purposes.

What are the staff and the courthouse in Saipan like?

At the U.S. District Court for the Northern Mariana Islands there is one Judge (the Chief Judge), two Law Clerks and a Chambers Administrator. In the Clerk's Office there is a staff of 8 plus the Court Reporter. The staff are diverse in ethnicity, gender and age. Most staff are long-term employees of the court. Several staff may be retiring in the near future. The court uses leased space in a privately-owned office building, rather than having its own courthouse building. The court occupies one and one-half floors of the building. The Marshal Service occupies one-half floor, and the U.S. Probation Office and U.S. Attorney are also tenants in the same building. There are not any divisional offices. Plans have been made to construct a new Federal courthouse in Saipan which would meet current security standards, but due to national budget concerns the new courthouse project is on a slow track.

What would the workload be at the District Court for the Northern Mariana Islands?

The U.S. District Court for the Northern Mariana Islands has a low caseload and a high rate of pre-trial disposal of cases. There is only one Judge, one courtroom, and one Court Reporter. Trials are usually conducted within the timeframe of 9:00am to 5:00pm, with a lunch break. Motion hearings often begin at 8:00am. The current Chief Judge rarely extends trials or other court matters into late hours or Saturdays, but there are occasions when such hours are required.

What are the usual earnings from transcript fees?

Fee rates for transcripts and copies are set by the United States Courts, at the nationwide fee schedule. Historically in this District, annual transcript and copy fees have been approximately \$7,000 non-trial and \$10,000 trial appeal. This District has never offered real-time transcription service. It is likely that parties would request and pay for real-time transcription if it were available.

Are relocation expenses paid for the Court Reporter?

We have inquired with the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts regarding payment of relocation expense in the event a Court Reporter is hired from outside the region of the Northern Mariana Islands. We are hopeful that some negotiated amount of relocation expense could be paid, but we do not have any approval at this time.

How can I interview for the Court Reporter position?

First, please submit your cover letter, current resume, and a photocopy of professional certifications by mail or courier to our address, as shown in the vacancy announcement. This constitutes your application for this vacancy. Every application will be reviewed, but not every applicant will be selected for interview. Applicants from the Northern Mariana Islands who are selected for interview will be interviewed in Saipan. For other applicants we will attempt to arrange interview dates when our court staff are attending conferences in the U.S. mainland, so that interviewees can reduce their own travel cost to the interview. Those applicants who are selected for interview will be contacted after a time and place for interview has been determined.